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# NSF grant funds ILR research to unlock U.S. Census data

By Mary Catt | October 17, 2011

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The ILR School's Labor Dynamics Institute will receive almost \$3 million over five years to establish research networks ("nodes") to solve problems confronting national statistics agencies. The network is intended to foster long-term collaborations between university-based research teams and the statistical agencies.

The grant, from the National Science Foundation-Census Research Network, is aimed at finding new ways to unlock social, behavioral and economic data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. The work will be conducted in collaboration with the Cornell Institute of Social and Economic Research.

Labor Dynamics Institute Director John Abowd, the Edmund Ezra Day Professor of Economics, and Executive Director Lars Vilhuber, senior research associate in labor economics, said that work under the grant will "bridge public and confidential knowledge repositories, allowing social

scientists better access to the information on labor markets already collected by the Census Bureau.”

The initial focus of the grant, Abowd said, will be to develop methods to curate labor market data so that in 100 years, “somebody looking back can still make sense of it. Curation of these data resources is a real problem for our statistical agencies.”

“This is a big win for Cornell’s social science community,” said William Block, director of the Cornell Institute for Social and Economic Research (CISER), “in that Cornell graduate students will be learning cutting-edge approaches to large-scale data and documentation problems ... [and] having these skills on campus should benefit other data-intensive Cornell projects and provide students with an edge in the job market.”

Nodes established by the grants will conduct long-term, interdisciplinary, methodological research and education on the production of data and related statistics, Block said. In addition to generating new research methods, advanced practices and procedures, the nodes will relate basic research findings to the missions of the federal statistical system. These include collecting data that serve the public interest through censuses, surveys and administrative records while respecting the privacy of individual citizens and businesses.

The grant complements projects at the Labor Dynamics Institute’s Virtual Research Data Center, including the synthetic data server, which provides researchers early access to census data, and the Social Science Gateway to TeraGrid, which allows researchers to perform preliminary data analysis prior to harnessing national supercomputing resources.

*Mary Catt is assistant director of communications at the ILR School.*

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